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FOR EUR/CARC; PLEASE PASS TO JOSEPH WOOD AT THE OVPC

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [AJ](#)  
SUBJECT: JOSEPH WOOD'S MEETING WITH ISLAMIC ANALYSTS

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Deputy Assistant to the Vice President for National Security Affairs Joseph Wood and the Ambassador met with local Islamic analysts on May 30. The analysts agreed that Islamic observance is growing in Azerbaijan, particularly among the youth. The growth of Islam is in part a natural rediscovery of Azerbaijani's cultural and religious identity, although some external forces -- particularly from Iran, Turkey, and Arab countries and the North Caucasus -- are influencing this process. The spread of Wahhabism is the most prolific foreign influence, especially because Wahhabis have well-developed outreach plans and funding sources, according to the analysts. Local analysts highlighted that a religious vacuum exists because there are limited opportunities for Azerbaijanis to learn about Islamic theology and practice, and especially, moderate forms of Islam. One local analyst also highlighted the rising number of heated disagreements among Muslims as a disturbing trend. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Deputy Assistant to the Vice President for National Security Affairs Joseph Wood and the Ambassador met with local Islamic analysts on May 30. Participants included: Dr. Altay Geyushov, Baku State University professor  
Dr. Naile Suleymanova, Azerbaijan National Academy of Science  
Aysel Vezirova, Eurasia Foundation  
Dr. Arif Yunus, Institute of Peace and Democracy

Islamic Practice Rising  
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¶3. (C) All participants agreed that in general, Islamic observance has been growing in Azerbaijan since independence in 1991. Yunus and Vezirova noted that a key demographic segment to monitor is youth, who have little or no experience living under the former Soviet system. Geyushov argued that the Azerbaijan population is in the midst of a natural, long-term rediscovery of their religious and cultural identity. In comparison to the North Caucasus and Central Asia, however, Islamic observance in Azerbaijan is growing at a slower rate, according to Geyushov. In addition to indigenous Islam, there are three major sources of foreign religious influence in Azerbaijan: Shiism from Iran, the Nurcu movement from Turkey, and Wahhabism from Arab countries and the North Caucasus region.

Theological Knowledge Gap  
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¶4. (C) Participants acknowledged a common theme: there is a dearth of information and quality literature on Islam in Azerbaijan, and especially more moderate forms of Islam. Many Azerbaijani Muslims are unable to learn about Islam from available literature or from their local imams. They are

particularly vulnerable therefore to influence from more active, more radical, Islamic representatives. This trend is exacerbated, in part, by the GOAJ's effort to regulate the distribution of religious materials. In the words of Vezirova, "the state seeks to centralize the dissemination of religious knowledge, but it has failed."

15. (C) Yunus and Geyushov observed that Wahhabism has been able to spread because it possesses a strong financial base and a robust propaganda machine. Wahhabism also is growing in appeal as an alternative ideology or "third-way" for Azerbaijanis who do not favor a pro-Western or pro-Russian orientation for Azerbaijan, Yunus noted. In particular, Wahhabism focuses on those Azerbaijanis who are disenchanted with Azerbaijan's move toward the West. Yunus explained that many Azerbaijanis perceive the presence of Western oil companies, changing social morals and traditions, and the GOAJ's level of corruption as a consequence of Azerbaijan's western orientation. Wahhabism first gained a base among minorities living in the northern part of Azerbaijan, although Wahhabism is making inroads among Azerbaijanis living in major cities, according to Yunus. In addition to Wahhabism, some participants acknowledged the steady growth of the Nurcu Islamic movement in Azerbaijan, particularly through the schools they have established here, which offer a good education, in contrast to Azerbaijan's deteriorating and corrupt public school system. Many Azerbaijanis do not understand the religious influence the Nurcu movement is gaining through the schools, in the view of the analysts. As most local contacts tell us, however, the analysts focused on Wahhabism as a more nefarious and powerful external religious force.

#### Interconfessional Disagreements Increasing

BAKU 00000700 002 OF 002

16. (C) Vezirova said there is a disturbing trend of heated disagreements among learned Azerbaijani Muslims. Geyushov and others agreed that while most Azerbaijanis are ignorant of the differences between Sunni and Shia believers, there is an increased differentiation among educated Azerbaijani Sunni and Shia believers. Vezirova remarked that there has been a rise in the number of educated Azerbaijanis having sophisticated theological arguments on internet sites. Vezirova argued that there is a need to teach the "ethics of disagreement" amongst Azerbaijani Muslims, a tradition that is in keeping with Islamic history.

#### Comment

17. (C) We agree with these local analysts that there is a religious void within Azerbaijan, which active, more radical local Islamic representatives are moving to fill in the absence of information and literature on moderate forms of Islam. We believe we can influence the trend here, but it requires focused attention and active engagement to promote contact with moderate forms of Islam for newly observant Azerbaijanis. The Ambassador has reached out to a range of U.S. Islamic groups to offer to facilitate contact. The recent visits of Farah Pandith and Dr. Liyakat Takim were helpful in identifying other steps. We welcome continued engagement and support from the Department on this key issue. Today's youth are more religiously observant, and we will continue to engage with them to understand how they are gaining knowledge about their Islamic faith. Two DRL-funded projects with the Eurasia Foundation and Internews are opportunities to broaden our engagement with and understanding of Azerbaijani Muslims.

DERSE